



Collective Benefit

As advocates for affordable housing, we know that we need help to accomplish our goals. We need a strong partner in our state and local governments, we need people in our community to be good neighbors, and the residents of our affordable housing need good jobs, transit and access to schools. Part of the solution involves advocating for and inspiring community action.

Cognitive science and framing research offers some clues. How? Through language and communication. Articulating the shared benefits of the solutions we're proposing is a great place to start. Our actions and proposals to increase the supply of safe, stable, and affordable housing require collective action — and provide collective benefit. Simple shifts in our language can help cue up stories and solutions that are collective, and inspire people to get involved.

The triumphant individual is a story of independence — it is about people who work hard, and persevere, and overcome odds. It's the narrative about "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," the "self-made man," and the story that tells us anyone can make it if they just try hard enough.

Questions to Ask Yourself

As a housing advocate, do the solutions I'm proposing require collective action — i.e., government or community action? Who needs to act to move us towards a solution?

Examples:

Before: Having a home that's affordable and stable means parents and adults can work and help provide for their families, and that kids can succeed in school. It means that seniors can live with dignity and grow older in the communities they helped to build, and it means veterans can find stability after serving their country. Today, this vision is just a dream for too many people in the state. Too many families have to choose between paying rent and putting food on the table, or buying medicine. Too many residents don't have the security and stability that home provides, and too many veterans sleep in doorways.

After: We know that having a home that's affordable and stable means parents and adults can work and help provide for their families, and that kids can succeed in school. It means that our seniors can live with dignity and grow older in the communities they helped to build, and it means our veterans can find stability after serving our country. We also know that today, this vision is just a dream for too many of our neighbors. Too many of our families and neighbors have to choose between paying rent and putting food on the table, or buying medicine. Too many of our neighbors don't have the security and stability that home provides, and too many of our veterans sleep in doorways.

Background

As noted in the Framing discussion people come into conversations and discussions with cultural models and lived experience informing their thinking. Former Labor Secretary and UC Berkeley Professor Robert Reich wrote about four parables of American society. These are cultural models that influence American thinking about public issues. Two of the parables are the "Triumphant Individual" and the "Benevolent Community." These stories are familiar to all of us, and we hold both stories in our heads as true. Our understanding of framing and cognitive science tells us that we can and often do hold contradictory stories in our heads at one time.

The triumphant individual is a story of independence — it is about people who work hard, and persevere, and overcome odds. It's the narrative about "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," the "self-made man," and the story that tells us anyone can make it if they just try hard enough. The benevolent community is a story of interdependence — it is about communities coming together to overcome or solve problems. It's a narrative about "barn raisings" and sandbagging before floods.

Economist Jared Bernstein describes this another way. He identifies the "WITTs" and the "YOYOs" — or those who believe "We're In This Together" versus "You're On Your Own." It's the same stories we identify above — one about interdependence, and one about independence.

Exercises

- › Read something you've written or a newspaper article – can you identify the independence frame or language? What about the interdependence frame or language?
- › Rewrite something you've written to call on the interdependence frames by using "we" and "our" language.

Next Steps

- › Try incorporating "we" and "our" language into your work – your legislative testimony, your newsletter, etc.
- › Think about your audience. What is the action you're trying to inspire in them? What is the solution you're advocating for that requires them to get involved? How can you use language to help them see their

More Resources

Read "The Lost Art of the Democratic Narrative" by Robert Reich: <http://neighborhoodpartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/The-Lost-Art-of-Democratic-Narrative.pdf>

Read Jared Bernstein's blog post about the WITTs versus the YOYOs: <http://jaredbernsteinblog.com/youre-on-your-own-vs-were-in-this-together/>

Read Robert Putnam's piece "Crumbling American Dreams" <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/03/crumbling-american-dreams/>